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ABSTRACT

A variety of educational practices are used to support adult learners (who are part-time learners and full-time workers as teachers or trainers) in fully World Wide Web-delivered college courses at the University of Central Florida. Use of the Web as the sole means of delivery offers some challenges for learner support, especially for adults, non-traditional students, and minorities. Some of the challenges include newness to technologies, access, software learning, and the traditional challenges to adults, such as lack of time and family demands. A variety of techniques are used to support adult learners facing these challenges, including the following: (1) an orientation session and hands-on training; (2) Web support through a new program, Web PALs (Peer Assisted Learners); (3) a minority student program; (4) peer support within courses; (5) individual e-mail contact; and (6) traditional telephone calls. This article contains descriptions of these approaches and offers strategies for implementing similar approaches at other schools. A telephone survey given to a randomly selected group of 45 minority students who have taken a web course is included. Only 28 of the 45 said they would take another web course. (Contains 147 references: 132 web sites, 8 books, and 7 ERIC documents.) (KC)

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Supporting adult students in Web-based courses: real examples for serving non-traditional, adult, and minority students

Presentation at National adult learner conference, Richmond, VA 1998.

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Abstract

This article describes relevant practices used to support adult learners in fully Web-delivered courses. In one program on campus all program courses are ONLY taught using the Web. The target group is adults who are part-time learners and full-time workers as teachers or trainers.

Use of the Web as the sole means of delivery offers some challenges for learner support, especially for adults, non-traditionals, and minorities. Some of the challenges include newness to technologies, access, learning software, and the traditional challenges to adults.

We have focused on these challenges through a variety of techniques. Included are: orientation session/hands-on training, Web support through a new (PALs) program, minority student program, peer support within courses, individual e-mail contact, & traditional telephone calls. The article includes descriptions of these approaches and offers strategies for implementing similar approaches at other schools.

Supporting students:

Overview

Consideration of the learner is essential in planning and implementing Web-based courses. The focus here is on the adult learners and uses recent comments from a students involved in Web delivered courses. Like most typical adult learners, these students attend part-time while working full-time with family and life's responsibilities. They usually return to class for required re-certification or mandated training. The comments are offered as a composite picture. Quotes are used only when paraphrasing was not done and represent composite quotes in order to profile a "generic Web student."

What support is needed?

General

"Support to be a successful Web student comes from family, friends, co-workers, and other Web students. Web courses are time-consuming." As evident in some of the forthcoming comments, these students come to Web learning with great trepidation but are willing to try anything to get out of traveling, spending week-ends in class, and student commuting costs. "Instead of having a hard drive to school, I use my hard drive for school."

New Web Students

First time Web students are amazed at the support offered by the experienced "Webbies." Often it is the very encouragement needed to keep them enrolled.

For "newbies", it is not so much the assignment that may be in question, but the "how-to's". For example, how to send an attachment, how to post on forums, how to keep up the pace are part of the frequently asked questions. The "how-do-I's" are also important; how do I copy and paste, 'toggle' among open programs, use search engines or databases, and how do I retrieve a lost posting?"

Support by the instructional staff

Effective programs must be supportive of students in Web-based courses. An orientation with hands-on instruction on the course pages addressing any student questions about their use of technology is one method of support. It is easier on the learners and instructors if students get this information first-hand. Specific introductions for support and teaching staff and smaller course cohort groups are also beneficial during orientation. "During the first one, I was overwhelmed and questioned my sanity for even being there and taking these Web courses. I stayed because the course was required and I had no other choice."

Some students start with absolutely no experience on the Internet and little or no experience in word processing. There may be an initial period of "total frustration and tears." "I got wonderful encouragement from the teacher by telephone, until I worked out my server problems. I'd call in virtual tears; virtual flowers of encouragement would be sent in return."

The bravest but best approach is to get on-line with the course and experiment. Support is available for each student through faculty, support staff and seasoned students. "We only have to ask, and the answers are given."

A student's browser software may provide compatibility problems with the course's software or one may be unable to log in due to a "glitch" in the class log-in process itself. It is beneficial to "talk" to the teachers with some means other than the computer. "Any time I have had a problem I have received assistance immediately with satisfying results. Yes, I love the computer; but when it's down or something isn't working , there has to be an old-fashioned back-up system."

Peer support

Students are generous with help for other students and the use of "Web PALS (Peer Assisted Learners) is a good idea." Because of improvements in web course software and course formats, the level of future support may decrease. "Often, when I log onto class, new and easier things have happened to the Forum. It used to take ½ day to get through class discussion in what now I can cover in an hour. I learned quickly that I must dedicate that time everyday, double up the next day, or be lost."

As with most adult learners, life's responsibilities and pressures are many. "I had days of 'Oh! This is awful, I'll never get through this', to days of 'I love this, it is too cool. Yeah! I can handle this'. It was a constant and daily see-saw. I still have occasional days of frustration when I can't find a Web site that fits the activity at hand. I no longer have to go to the beach to go 'surfing', I can throw a log on the fire, while I log onto the forums and I can do this in pajamas with a cup of coffee and no makeup or hairdo while making dinner. While my husband is in the driveway searching his engine for a problem, I am in the house using a search engine to answer my problem. I can start class, be interrupted to attend my daughter's open house at school, and come home to finish class discussion."

What organization is essential for success in a Web-based course?

The course

Organization is essential both for the student and the instructor. Instructors should post tips to follow when using the forum, mail, and other "cyber-areas" at the very beginning of class to save time and student frustration. Changes within the course format during the course should be minimal. Since not all students can be on-line daily or even every other day, there should be a designated forum announcing format and syllabus changes that may occur.

Due dates to complete projects must be posted well in advance. Instructors and students need to be aware that for instructors this is their main job; while for students, this is a requirement for their main job. This means that adult learners fit the course demands into any available remaining time and much of the work may be restricted to weekends or evenings and questions that arise aren't answered until the following workday.

Although an asynchronous format can play havoc with any changes in organizational plans, Web-based instructors provide opportunities for people to continue taking classes despite other obligations. "They treat us as equals and maintain that we are a team, each member an integral part, and what happens to one affects us all."

Time management

Web students are quickly aware that they must use good time management skills to complete assignments and to correspond with classmates. It is also the student's responsibility to be aware of important dates. Can all this be done with time to spare?. "Time management skills and a really big calendar with different colored pens to keep track of assignments are recommended."

Organizational skills learned before becoming a web student are used to complete course tasks. "To insure learning and enjoyment of the course each one of us needs some semblance of thought and ideas as to how to tackle the program with as much aplomb as possible. Am I cognizant of the avenues that are available to me for this assignment? If I am not, then some advisement needs to be attempted."

"Enrolling in Web courses lets you manage the time you spend on learning along with your everyday schedule and therefore gives you a flexibility that isn't there with most classes. It could however be a problem for those that don't manage their time wisely. I wish this type of course delivery was available in more areas."

Self-motivation

If you are not a self-motivated person, you might not be successful in Web-based courses. "Web-based learning is a wonderful opportunity. Education at your convenience. Who would have thought? I can work on my class any time I want without being tied down to a certain time period. I can have career, family, and an education at the same time. Without Web-based delivery, this wouldn't be possible."

Interaction

Most Web-based courses have some sort of interaction, or at least should have, because interaction is the "glue" that bonds Web-based learners together. Techniques used may include: electronic mail, synchronous chat rooms, or asynchronous forums or bulletin boards.

"If you fall behind in the class, you can become electronically 'buried.'" It is essential that you sign on to the class course page several times each week. "If I check on a daily basis for the course forum messages, I can respond to classmates when the information is needed and keep on top of the class." Signing on daily rather than weekly to read messages takes much less time. Weekly checking means you are responding to "old" messages. The more you communicate on the class forums, the more involved you become in your class, and thus the more you learn. "I have received many tips from others in the course which have assisted me with my own classroom."

What technologies are required for success?

Hardware/software

The basic tool needed for taking on-line courses is a computer. Internet access with a reliable Internet Service provider, a current version of MS Windows, and a good word processing program are all mandatory. The computer has to be able to send e-mail with an attachment, have current browser software, and "fast" (28.8 bpm) modem speed. Having a clear printer and sufficient paper are also important.

"I didn't realize how much extra time I was spending on-line when all I had to use was a very old computer at home. Once I had a newer computer to use, I realized the inequality of students' abilities. Like in a regular classroom, not all students were equal, but this time it was due to something other than intelligence."

Internet access

Subscribing to a reliable local or national Internet Service Provider with quality service and a proper "fit" with the software used in the course is essential. A person taking a course on the Web should be familiar with e-mail, forums, and finding their way around the Internet. "Experience with the World Wide Web and e-mail would make starting Web courses much easier but it is not essential. There should be enough support to get you started in the beginning as long as you attend the orientation."

What success is earned by participating in Web courses?

Web-based courses are a means of access for those who otherwise could or would not attend in-person courses due to commuting costs, time constraints of work, and/or family responsibilities.

Some adults come to Web courses with no computer skills. "In the period of time for my first course, I went from being essentially computer illiterate to being computer knowledgeable. I am proof that one can succeed in Web based education because there

are others that are more computer literate that have helped me. Now I have started helping others that are just beginning their Web based education."

Some adults learners already have gained computer skills. "When I came to the first course, I was not afraid of the computer, but now I am much more willing to strike out and investigate. If an error or hung script message pops up, then I try another tact. I have learned to love the computer and spend hours looking around. These courses have given me the know-how and freedom to accomplish this. I have been exposed to the multiple search engines available and numerous research areas to explore. Besides, I have learned the content of the specific courses. I am glad that I took these courses and will certainly consider taking some more."

One of the best advantages of distance learning is the ability to increase communication with your classmates. When you take a face-to-face class, there usually isn't a lot of time to share information. There is more student interaction in Web based courses than traditional classrooms. "I know I am less apprehensive in making comments to questions that are posted on the Web. On the course forums all you have to do is ask for information or place an idea to debate with others The posted question then ends up with many more comments than the same question posed in a traditional classroom I have received great tips that I have put to use in my classroom and they have made me a better teacher. It is also nice to hear that everyone else is having the same concerns or problems as you, you're not out there alone. One of our best teaching tools is the knowledge of other teachers. We all need to share and do what's best for the students; the forums provide an opportunity to do this."

Group communication also increases over traditional classroom teaching. "In the classroom environment we gather in groups by who we like or fit in with. On the Internet, that opportunity is not available because you have to talk to everyone." In our situation students are graded on communication with one another. "What a great way to learn what is going on in other students' lives."

The convenience of getting on to class when you have time is important for adult Web students. "I spend more time doing homework now, then when I was in a classroom. I probably would not have gone back to school with my children so young if this type of class was not offered. I chose Web based education because of the convenience. Between job, family life, and taking courses, time management is so critical. I set aside a specific time, generally late at night, to work on my Web assignments."

The information received from fellow classmates about Web sites assists peers in their work. "I have learned so much in a short time, not only about how to teach, but about myself and my fellow professionals. We have gone through a virtual bonding and give each other support, encouragement and we share levity to spice up the class. By sitting right here at home I am able to improve myself intellectually, learn information that benefits my work activities, and satisfy my job requirements."

Web-based learning is highly challenging and very fulfilling. One of the most interesting things misconceptions by uninformed people is equating web courses with low-quality correspondence courses. "One person even asked if I was going to a 'qualified' college."

There is more interaction among students in a Web-based class than in the conventional classroom. "These interchanges are thoughtful, meaningful entries posted in an on-line forum from the privacy of the students' homes." For example, from 2,000 -5,000 entries per semester are made in the discussion forums alone, which is much more interaction than in a traditional course; and this does not include the thousands of Internet e-mail and class mail communications.

Experiences students have are very positive. "For one who had thought that learning had to be in the old context of formal learning--i.e. being in a classroom, attending certain days and hours and having the teacher lecture each time--was I ever wrong! The success that you earn comes from the desire to succeed. This new endeavor has proven to be the easiest. Meaning that as long as I discipline myself to at least two hours a day/evening at the computer doing the assignments and answering other students in this class on the forums and posting my replies, then my time is my own."

"The first success for me was searching the Web and finding the needed information to complete the assignment. My next personnel success was sending an attachment." Success is validated from the instructor in the form of points, with an idea as to why full points were not earned and how to fix it. "I feel that I have learned more in one Web class than I have in all my years in school. The information I have learned will really help me out in the real world, right from the start."

Summary

Web based learning today is an important learning tool. It is a communication tool between other students and gives you an opportunity to openly discuss your views regarding the subject matter. Information is right at your fingertips. There is no need to leave your home to search for articles in a library. It saves a lot of time, especially if you work full-time and have to care for a family. "In all honesty, the idea of returning to college via the Web is phenomenal! In this day and age I realize that very little is impossible, but to bring the classroom home and not have to run to class is a miracle and very much appreciated. I do not feel that anything has been eliminated taking this course or any future course over the web. What I have been able to accomplish and learn absolutely astounds me. New friends have been made. I hope they will be there to completion; they are beautiful people. I hope that we maintain contact!"

"In my opinion, Web-based learning is the best thing that ever happened; without it, I wouldn't be able to continue my education. Without Web-based technology, most students would not be able to complete their education, as they are working full-time and raising a family, which limits their opportunity to travel for classes. I am looking forward to continuing taking my classes via the Web. It gives one a feeling of accomplishment and well-being. If there had been classes available over the Web years ago, I might have laughed it off, but having been indoctrinated to a new way of thinking, there is no better way."

Results from a survey of current Web students

The following results are from a brief survey of current in two courses during the 1998 summer session. The results support earlier comments from the spring semester.

1. What types of support do you need to succeed in Web courses?

Since this is my first course, I am not sure of what exactly is needed. However, right now, I feel I should be on REAL TIME with an instructor - letting me know if I am using the software or program correctly. I feel I am wasting a lot of time.

As an individual, I need support from my instructors, my employer, my class peers and most of all from my family.

The type of support I found most helpful was the hands on orientation. Without it I would have found starting my first online course very intimidating if not impossible.

The support that I needed the most was from someone using the same computer system I was using, and that person should have more knowledge than you in order to walk you through the "glitches" I also found the Tech support people extremely helpful. I want the add the support and cooperation of family is important as they must fend for themselves frequently. Your instructor support is crucial in having them understand the frustrations of a first web based course.

2. Specifics?

I need real on-line help. Perhaps the software "net-meeting or some other which would allow me to go back and forth between packages to learn the right procedures.

From my instructors - the positive reinforcement that I continually got while I was going through the transition of a "newbie" to...whatever I'm called now, having the third class starting, and feeling more comfortable with the media used:

Employer - allowing me to take this instruction while they encourage my success by demanding A's and B's in order for them to foot the bill. I have so far proven to myself that I can be the best that I can be. If you would have asked me two years ago if I would be taking college classes, I would have told you I wasn't smart enough! My class peers - The encouragement I get from my peers in this class is immeasurable. Also unlike the traditional classroom has the few students who comment and the rest keep still. We still have that to a degree, however I have time to think about a response and I don't have anyone else in my face with their response, or out yelling me or out classing me. I can respond to anything I want to and am even encouraged to do so by my instructors. I am not an outcast or an outsider. No one's body language or tone of voice turns me off or away from discussion.

Family - my husband has been wonderful, making dinner, doing laundry, vacuuming and taking the kids where they needed to go, so that I had quality time in my class. My children have told me..."Go for it Mom!", and "I understand if you can't participate with us."

Making the transition from classroom learning to computer learning was a bit of a culture shock at first, but you get over it in time

3. What differences in support are needed because you are:
None in my opinion.

a. part-time adult learner?
EMPATHY!
Being a part time learner is my advantage, because it is MY part time that I am using. I get to pick and choose the time.
The differences in support that I find helpful as a part-time student are the 24 hour access and the length of time allowed to submit/respond to an activity.

b. female?
NONE.
I am female and that makes me a minority.
The only reason people know that I am a female is because my name is gender specific.

c. male?

d. minority?
However, I do speak Spanish fluently and can understand how a new learner with a language problem might find it over load.

The nice thing about this class is no one knows if I'm a minority.

4. What types of support have you encountered during this Web course from:
a. teacher in the course?
b. interns/course assistants/PALS?
c. other students in the course?
d. friends?
e. family?
f. other
As I stated before, I have not been online but just a few hours and can not relate yet. Tech support for computer problems, peer support in order to vent sometimes, and instructor support to help you make it through.

5. What support is still needed?

I would still like to see student able to get a library card to access the University's Library and online research. Sometimes I still have a hard time finding the information. I want from the Web, but I don't know if that can be helped or if it just takes experience on my part.

Technology changes so rapidly, we need to constantly be updated with new material to make our lives and virtual classrooms easier and manageable. Communication is the key!

Respondents:
Catherine Hall
Katherine Hawkins
Mary F. Johnson
Dianna Zometsky

Telephone Survey (Web Use Among Minority Students)

A random survey of 45 minority students who had taken a web course (38 female, 7 males, 8 freshmen, 12 sophomores, 10 juniors, 15 seniors, 28 African-Americans, and 17 Hispanics) revealed that only 11 of the students had a computer at home that they used to complete web course assignments. Of the remaining students, 28 used computers at school exclusively and 6 had access to a computer at work as well as school.

Students with computers at home were more satisfied with web course than those who did not. "I liked the web course, it was convenient. I could do work at 2:00 in the morning. I didn't have to drive out to campus or sit in a class for three or four hours. I could do my work at my own pace at my own time."

All of the students said they had gained more computer skills as a result of having been enrolled in web courses. However, only 28 of the 45 said they would take another web course. Students most often cited too much work and access to a computer as deterrents to taking another web course. "The Professor gave too much work. Some professors overload you to compensate for the fact that you are not in class. I probably spent more time on this one class that all of the others. A lot of the time was spent trying to find a computer I could use."

The survey

Classification: FR SOP JR SR Gender: M F Race: AA HS AS

1. Have you ever taken a web course?
   ____ yes, continue ____ no, go to # 10

2. Rate your experience (with 1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest)

   a. Convenience _____
   b. Content _____
   c. Support _____
   d. Academic integrity _____

3. Where did you do most of the work for the course? (Circle one)

   a. Home
   b. work
   c. school (UCF)

4. What did you like most about the course?

5. What did you like least or dislike about the course?

6. What were some of the obstacles you encountered in taking the web course, if any?

7. How much computer knowledge did you have before taking the course?

8. Did your computer knowledge increase as a result of taking the course?

9. Will you take another web course?

Answer only if you answered no to question #1

10. How likely are you to take a web course?

    a. 1 Not at all
    b. 2 Maybe
    c. 3 Undecided
    d. 4 Probably will
    e. 5 Definitely will

11. Why?

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A bit of prose as a reminder...

Remember when...

A computer was something on TV,
from a science fiction show.
A window was something you hated to clean,
and RAM was the cousin of a goat.
MEG was the name of an old girlfriend.
Now they all mean different things,
And that really MEGA bytes.

An application was for employment,
a program was a TV show.
a cursor used profanity,
and a keyboard was a piano.

Memory was something that you lost with age,.
a CD was a bank account.
Compress was something you did to the garbage,
not something you did to a file.
And if you unzipped anything in public,
you'd be in jail for a while

Log-on was adding wood to the fire,
a hard drive was a long trip on the road,
a mouse pad was where a mouse lived.
and a backup happened to your commode.

Cut you did with a pocket knife,
paste you did with glue.
A web was a spider's home
and a virus was the flu.
Cash was money you spent.

I guess I'll stick to my pad and paper,
and the memory in my head.
I hear nobody's been killed in a computer crash.
But when it happens they wish they were dead.

Unknown author.

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University of Central Florida Web sites:
(which we use to support Web-based students)

http://reach.ucf.edu/~voced/
Program in Vocational Education & Industry Training

University of Central Florida
http://www.ucf.edu/

http://library.ucf.edu/
Library

http://reach.ucf.edu/~sarc/
PALs On-Line

https://polaris.ucf.edu:/
Personal On-Line Access to Restricted Information Systems

http://pegasus.cc.ucf.edu/~sarc/
Student Academic Resource Center

http://pegasus.cc.ucf.edu/~ucfdist/
Virtual Campus

http://pegasus.cc.ucf.edu/~ucfed/
College of Education

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Nebraska Institute for the Study of Adult Literacy (Motivation)

http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/~ecottle/motivation.htmlDesign Strategies to Facilitate Learner Motivation

Technological Techniques
http://www.atl.ualberta.ca/presentations/learnchar/home.html
University of Alberta--Academic Technologies for Learning

http://www.atl.ualberta.ca/presentations/learnchar/learnchar.html#part1
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Adult Learner

http://www.wmc.edu/acad/rfts/adultprn.htm
Principles underlying Effective Practices in Adult Education

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Adult Learners' Week - A Success Story For Export

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A New Paradigm of Learning for Urban Adult Learners: Challenges for Educators and Policymakers Regarding Education and Community Service

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Multiple Intelligence for Adult Literacy & Adult Education

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Multiple Intelligence for Adult Learners and Adult Education

Andragogy
http://www.gwu.edu/~tip/knowles.html
Andragogy

http://www.acquireskills.com/adult.htmAdult Learning Theory Pedagogy versus Andragogyhttp://www.acquireskills.com/andragog.htmAndragogy...a highly relevant adult learning theory

Experimental Learning
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Experimental Learning

http://www.uni.edu/placemnt/student/explrng.html
University of Northern Iowa--Experimental Learning

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Who is Learning at a Distance?

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EJ447500
Making Distance Learning Effective: Key Roles and Responsibilities

EJ509496
Distance Education Success Factors--Adult Learning

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ED375311 May 95 Future of Distance Education in Community Colleges. ERIC Digest Author: Parrott, Sarah.

The non-traditional.

They call me non-traditional--

I often wonder why.
Is it because I'm different
or are they afraid to see
the individual within--
the real me?

There are some things about me you should know.
I am a bit older--at that in-between age.
I could be a parent or just a responsible adult.
Maybe I'm changing directions in life--
it happens to each of us.

This is also me--the non-traditional.
I have no time for nonsense because I have a goal.
Run-arounds I can't tolerate,
as I have a life to lead.
Working is necessary, so time is very precious.
Motivated I am; be prepared for me.

I have a right to be here and the will to succeed.
I am doing something different;
it is my life you see.
Is it because I have my goal
and you don't think I should?
Am I the non-traditional?
Are you afraid to see--
that next week or
next year you could be me?

Maybe, when we know each other,
there won't be a non-traditional.
Larry Hudson (included in book "...because I care", July ,1998)